

## content

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### First Person Language

#### Respect starts with language.

For centuries, words and terms have been used to identify people, for a variety of reasons and purposes. In our society, we tend to lock into specific language that may become descriptive, often times beyond the true character or make up of an individual.

Terms that reference someone's race, ethnicity, or religion, or the way a person carries themselves, are almost common in everyday discussion, however not without harm or misconception. We have seen certain language evolve, usually because it is politically correct, to what we now understand today as the 'right way' to reference someone.

However, one group of individuals seems to still hear a wide range of archaic verbiage from the vast majority of Americans. Individuals with disabilities have long been verbally abused by the general public, usually with the abusers being ignorant to it.

Many common day words, such as idiot, moron, and imbecile, have their roots in what was once 'acceptable' descriptors for certain individuals. Using disability-words-turned-insults and metaphors (turned a deaf ear, blind as a bat) are unacceptable. To the dismay and disgust of many, a word that seems to be still common but is as denigrating and inappropriate as any ethnic or racial slur is 'retard'. Knowing and having friends who have the antiquated 'label' of mental retardation hurts me even more. The United States is the only progressive country in the world to still use the term mental retardation (internationally accepted is intellectual disabilities).

However, inappropriate language does not stop there. Terms like cripple, lame, deaf and dumb, to name a few have long been shelved. But how about some as common as handicap. Yes, handicap is dead. The term comes from beggars who had their 'cap in hand'. The connotation is that individuals with disabilities could do nothing more than beg.

Governor Spitzer passed a state law this past summer that eliminates this word from any state correspondence or official documentation (laws, regulations , ordinances). The Person First law also calls for the end to improperly describing an individual by putting the person FIRST. For instance, it is not 'the disabled'; it is individual with a disability. Individuals use wheelchairs; they

are not bound to them. A person has autism, they are not autistic. When we identify someone noting their disability first, the reference is negative, and so is the attitude.

There is also a tendency to loosely use terms that have a link to mental health. Just as damaging are terms like 'schizo' or 'psycho'. Anti-stigma campaigns begin with the elimination of the abuse of such words.

Even the term disable is negative. It means 'not able'. That imbeds a thought that someone can't do. Can't do what? Work, be a neighbor, live independently? Is that why the employment rate and home ownership for people with disabilities is so abysmal? What we'd like to hear is differing abilities, don't we ALL have different talents and skills that we can bring to our community.

There are 60 million Americans with disabilities, the largest minority in the country, and arguably, the most discriminated against. If we start by simply eliminating certain words from our vocabulary and respecting proper language in everyday discussions it will be the beginning to fair and proper acceptance of individuals with differing abilities.

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## additional information

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### From an Attendee

*"...a wonderful fully educated man (father) of a son with special needs—someone who knows how an individual needs to be treated and fit into society today. I wish I could have attended something like this years ago.*

*Thank you,  
– Bonnie"*